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Sub-Urbana

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By

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Through a photographic survey of Urbana, Maryland in 2003, I have attempted to illuminate a fundamental dichotomy of suburban sprawl. While popular and affordable to the consumer, there is a high cost to our collective future associated with this type of housing development. Although there has been much written decrying its evils, sprawl continues to cover the countryside with unoriginal, lifeless housing tracts. In order to understand our impact on the environment and the global community, we must examine the consequences of our modes of living and our collective relationship to the land. The profligate manner in which we inhabit the suburbs of the United States is emblematic of the culture of consumption evident in this country. It is important to recognize that our consumption patterns, especially regarding fossil fuels, will have long-term effects, particularly on our global climate and economy. Americans have been conditioned to accept the boring repetition of form in our built landscape but, we must constantly re-examine what we have constructed in order to determine if our most popular building practices should persist. I have chosen to photograph the typical housing tracts of Urbana in an attempt to reveal what lies beneath the genteel exterior of many of this country's most popular housing developments.

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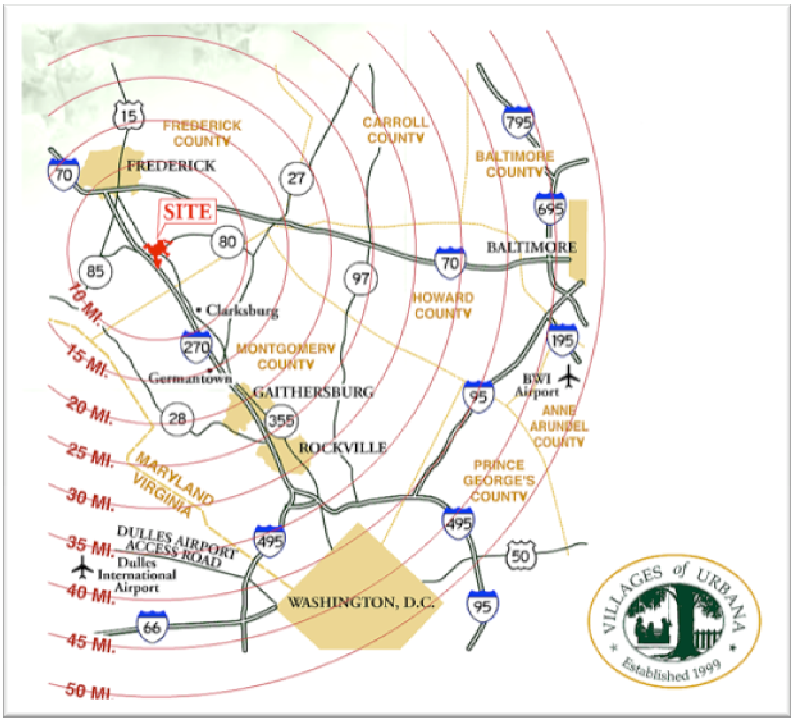
The most crucial impact of suburban sprawl is how suburban living contributes to our dependence on the automobile, and therefore oil. Life in the suburbs would not exist without a cheap, efficient fuel source such as oil. Automobile usage has so permeated our routine, especially in the United States, that there are few activities that can be accomplished without a car. Whether we are traveling to work, school or the store, the ubiquitous automobile has become an indispensible tool of transportation for suburban living. It is a scientifically accepted premise that if consumption rates of fossil fuels continue to rise, the damage to the futures of our climate and economy will be costly indeed.

Until the age of fifteen, my world consisted of the trees, meadows and hills of a pastoral farmland in Barnesville, Maryland. There were 223 acres of rolling hills, a creek and many trees besides the ones in the peach and apple orchards. Through my childhood experiences on the farm, I developed a great deal of respect and affinity for the unspoiled landscape. It was truly an idyllic setting I have already seen developed with three new houses on the hillside since I left in 1992. When I was fifteen, we moved to a cul-de-sac closer to my high school, but it was not until years later that I realized what I had lost when my family left the farm.

Breger Farm, Barnesville, Maryland, ca.1987

The suburban settlement of Urbana, Maryland was founded in 1999 and is of particular interest to me because it is located only a few miles from my childhood home in Barnesville. Also, it is one of the more recent towns in Maryland to become 'suburbanized' as that area of Frederick County was mostly farmland until only a few years ago. When I returned to the farm where I grew up, I was surprised to learn how close the suburbs had spread to my former home. Although Urbana is somewhat distant from the nearest major city centers, its proximity to Interstate 270 has allowed it to thrive. Urbana boasts its own library, several retail stores as well as Urbana High School. The city of Frederick is just a few miles to the north but Washington, D.C. and Baltimore are both roughly 45 miles away with only one commuter train line serving each city. The

average commute by car from Urbana to either Washington or Baltimore usually involves traffic related delays and can easily take over an hour during periods of peak congestion. Certainly, there are people who commute to destinations much closer than either Baltimore or Washington, but the lack of efficient public transportation in Urbana, and most of the rest of the suburbs of this nation leaves the automobile as the only practical form of transportation.



http://www.villagesofurbana.com/4_cl_regional.html

Because homes are cheaper in Frederick County than in counties closer to Washington or Baltimore, many residents are faced with the choice of affordable housing and long commutes versus more expensive houses with a shorter commute. With affordable gas prices in the late 1990s, the choice was clear for many prospective homeowners. Despite the recent literature decrying the evils of the suburbs, it is clear from their rapid growth that a house in the suburbs is a popular option for family living.

When considering how to photograph the imagery for "Sub-Urbana", I strove to reconcile two sides of sprawl. On the one hand, we have the recent literature that criticizes the current state of suburbia and blames it for many of society's ills, such as pollution, economic segregation, loss of community and generally not having places worth caring about. On the other hand, we have the success and popularity of the suburbs. Since World War II, this country has experienced an unprecedented exodus from the cities to the suburbs. It was crucial that the symbolism contained within the images of "Sub-Urbana" address this fundamental dichotomy of suburban sprawl.

The issue of how to photographically portray the housing tracts in Urbana, Maryland was influenced by several factors. First of all, I wanted to highlight the environmental agenda that has become associated with late 20th century landscape photography. The churned earth of the construction sites is meant to symbolize the effects of man's hand upon the landscape. The evidence of the hand of man is contrasted by the natural, unspoiled, blue skies. The blue skies are meant to symbolize the public's blissful ignorance of the problems with suburbia. Since suburbia's contributions to global warming are the fault of this nation's poor fuel efficiency standards as well as the fuel itself, as consumers we must demand better from our auto manufacturers and public officials. The construction sites remind us of the damage, seen and unseen, done to the environment in order to enable our collective consumptions.

Another important reason I chose to photograph Urbana while under construction was to utilize photography's power to freeze time and capture the land during a stage of transition. Late 20th century photographers such as Stephen Shore, Ed Ruscha, Lewis Baltz and Joe Deal have demonstrated that in the study of our suburban environments, it

is useful to record uncommonly seen views. Images of sprawl recorded during its construction phase provide us with a visual vocabulary not available at a later date. Also, by documenting one edge of suburbia as it moves inexorably across the land, we gain a greater sense of the manner in which our natural landscapes are disappearing. The photograph *Development* documents this suburban edge, and we are able to see three distinct stages as farmland is transformed into housing tracts.

Development, 2003

One aspect of the duality of American suburban sprawl is how many builders use housing designs from centuries past while still building houses that can accommodate all the amenities of the modern home, especially the automobile. Elements of architectural styles from colonial times can be found throughout the homes of Urbana. The Georgian style with its boxy shape and gabled roof serves as a template in many of the larger houses of Urbana, Maryland. These 'Mc Mansions', as they are often called, are advertised as 'Neo-Traditional Housing' and have many of the elements of the Colonial revival architectural style. This 'Neo-Georgian' home building style is especially prevalent in the Mid-Atlantic region. The gabled window dormers and elaborate front door complete with pediment are evident, but the overall design must be modified to accommodate at least one, and often two automobiles. The traditional symmetry is sacrificed to the demands of the automobile, namely the garage, which we see either pushed to the rear or off to one side. Builders use elements of style from colonial times in order to romanticize their product and increase the sale and resale values of their product. By playing on the nostalgic emotions of the consumer, the developer offers a familiar house that is similar to one's neighbor's and is more marketable than modern designs. I attempted to frame the scenes of "Sub-Urbana" to emphasize the lack of modern design as well as highlight the repetitiveness of many of the suburban facades. In the images *Backyard* and *Garage 'Roe'* the viewer is offered a stark reminder of how the banal homogeneity of the suburbs can be so blatant.

Backyard, 2003

Garage 'Roe', 2003

While there are many factors that have contributed to the success and popularity of suburban life since the 1950s, it would not exist in its present form without affordable gasoline. 2008 marks the 50th anniversary of the beginning of construction on President Eisenhower's Interstate Highway system that has continued to grow into the network of roads and highways we know today. Certainly, this network along with favorable mortgage policies and the automobile boom of the early twentieth century have contributed greatly to the average American's ability to live progressively further from city-centers. But, with little or no mass transit, most Americans must rely on the automobile for nearly all their transportation needs, and without affordable fuel the average commuter would be forced to seek an alternative mode of transportation when few are available. The average consumer will continue to use the automobile as long as it is affordable. Only when gasoline reaches a price that is prohibitive will we be forced to re-evaluate our transportation choices as well as our housing strategies. Since it is unlikely suburban residents will abandon their newly built infrastructure, it will soon become necessary for our government to more aggressively pursue alternative or renewable fuel options.

The arrival of the affordable automobile made one of the most significant impacts on the average American's ability to "sprawl". Because Henry Ford's Model T was affordable to the average worker, it gave more Americans a newfound freedom of mobility. The Model T became known as the people's car and gave the average consumer the freedom and mobility that had previously been reserved for the wealthy. "In the [20th]

century's first decade, automobile registrations rose from 8,000 to 469,000."[1] No longer were Americans dependent on traditional forms of transportation such as the train, ship and horse-drawn carriage to travel and carry their possessions.

There were numerous corporate interests at stake once the Model T became readily available in America. The road builders, rubber manufacturers, and especially the oil companies were able to bring a great deal of influence and pressure against other, more traditional, or possibly even more efficient modes of mass transit. These companies with a stake in the future of America's booming automobile industry realized that the more people who owned an automobile, the more profit they would make.

> The idea was to build a brand-new national network of uniform four-lane limited-access expressways that would eliminate the bottlenecks in the old hodge-podge of state roads, highways, and parkways. An irresistible coalition of lobbying interests – the combined might of the auto, trucking, oil, tire, asphalt, cement, steel, lumber, and construction industries, and their unions – got behind the idea and commenced a lavish campaign to promote it.[2]

It is no wonder that these various interests would also work together to undermine bus and streetcar lines, and any other mode of transport that might compete with the automobile. Soon, city streets were choked with the black metal of the automobile, yet another drawback to city life added to pollution, overcrowding and crime.

Thanks to the Federal Highway Acts of 1917 and 1921 and the Interstate Highway and Defense Act of 1956, in a few short decades, Washington was a principal force in building this nation's roads. At the end of World War II, with 10 million young men returning from Europe, the demand for housing experienced a sharp spike in the middle

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[1] Jane Holtz Kay, Asphalt Nation, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997), p. 142.
[2] James Howard Kunstler, The Geography of Nowhere, (New York: Touchstone, 1993), p. 106

of the 20th century.[3] One group of developers who sought to fulfill this need was the Levitt family. Their early American suburb built on Long Island in 1947 became a template for future suburban developments. Levittown, New York consisted of wooden, 750-square foot Cape Cod style houses, every one identical to its neighbor. With Federal Housing Administration (FHA) loans it was easy and affordable for returning veterans to acquire a house in the suburbs. "Levittown was the Model T of the built environment. It was assembly line architecture erected in massive numbers to coax the veteran in his car to the green fields of the East." [4] While this construction technique allowed for more houses to be built faster and cheaper, the resulting tracts were boring and repetitive. This practice of constructing houses that are more or less the same is a trend that continues today in towns such as Urbana, Maryland.

Levittown, NY, 1959

[3] Jane Holtz Kay, Asphalt Nation, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 227.
[4] Jane Holtz Kay, Asphalt Nation, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 227.

In 1956, when President Eisenhower signed the Interstate Highway and Defense Act he put "Washington dead center as the engine of highway making."[5] These massive highway projects funded by the federal government alleviated unemployment and connected many of this country's various regions. However, the sudden increase in roads was not without costs. In many instances, portions of the inner city were designated as 'blight' and were replaced with freeways. This gutting of American cities made them much less hospitable especially for its wealthier residents. The ensuing exodus from these increasingly dangerous, polluted and blighted cities was labeled 'White Flight'. Once we consider the changes in the infrastructure of the city in conjunction with financial incentives such as the federal income tax mortgage payment exemption, it is easy to understand why so many people decided to move into a house on a green lot in the suburbs.

While there are certainly many factors encouraging people to settle along the urban periphery, it is hard to overstate the relationship between the affordable automobile and the success of suburbia. The suburban settlement pattern and highway matrix simply would not exist if cars were not affordable to most Americans. The problem is that the affordability of the automobile is an illusion. In his book, Home From Nowhere, James Howard Kunstler outlines how an average automobile owner in this country will spend upwards of $440,000 over 30 years of car ownership and be left with a car that is worth at best, a few thousand dollars. But, because of the car loan and the absolute necessity of an automobile in this country, most Americans own a car no matter how financially absurd long-term ownership may be.

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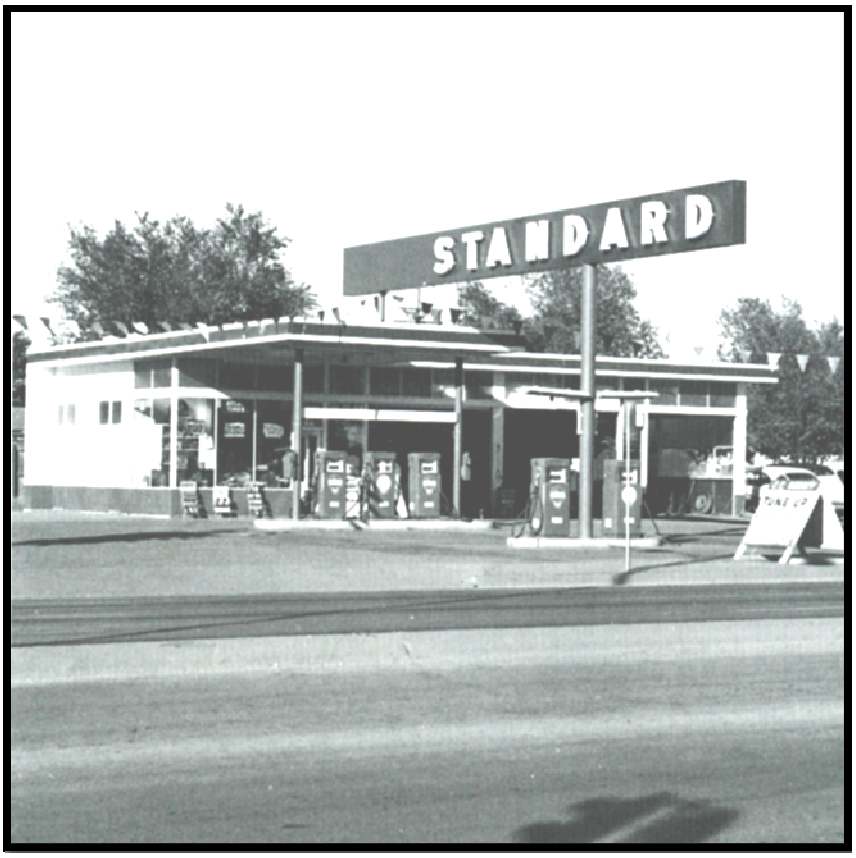
[5] Jane Holtz Kay, Asphalt Nation, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 175.

Once we begin to photograph the suburban landscape, we must recognize that we are working in the tradition of the 'New Topographics' movement. It originated as an exhibition entitled *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man Altered Landscape* at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York in 1975 and included the photographic work of numerous artists, some working in black and white and some in color. The title of the show belies the environmental agenda of the work. It suggests a documentation of the hand of man upon the landscape. Also, the inclusion of the word 'New' indicates that the landscapes are changing and the scenes contained within the photographs are recent developments upon our environment making these photographs of particular importance. The use of the word 'New' could also be seen as way to separate the work in the Rochester exhibition from the earlier work to come from the early photographic surveys of the American West by such photographers as Timothy H. O'Sullivan and Carleton E. Watkins. One of the tenets of the 'New Topographics' movement was that the photographers of that school attempted to remove their personal opinions from their work in order to make impartial photographic documents, without emotion or opinion. The 'New Topographics' movement established a benchmark for 20th century photography and inspired a generation of photographers to make landscape photographs of our built environment as both art and document.

One artist who was not included in the Rochester exhibition but whose philosophy and photographs were similar to those of 'New Topographics' was Ed Ruscha. While Ruscha is primarily a painter, he was able to use the photographic medium prior to 1975 to achieve what he claimed to be a "no-style".

Between 1963 and 1978, Ruscha produced sixteen photographic books, publishing most of them himself.… The majority (although not all) of the photographs were taken by Ruscha, in, according to him, the most neutral or "factual" manner possible. As he remarked, 'Actually what I was after was no-style or a non-statement with a no-style.'[6]



Ed Ruscha, *Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas*, 1962

[6] Margit Rowell. Ed Ruscha, Photographer, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2006), p. 11.

Many of Ruscha's photographs were taken in black and white, and contained everyday scenes from city and suburbs. Two of his books, Twentysix Gasoline Stations (1963) and Every Building on the Sunset Strip (1966) are typologies of common locations around the Los Angeles area. What makes these books uncommon is the way Ruscha records and collects the buildings, paved lots and gasoline stations. The *Sunset Strip* book folds out like an accordion providing a panoramic view allowing the viewer to see the areas surrounding each building and gain a greater understanding of the relationships between the building facades and the street. His book entitled Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles (1967) consisted of aerial photographs of mostly empty parking lots of various shape and design. The stark, graphic nature of these photographs provides us with an uncommon view of familiar spaces. By giving his viewers an elevated point of view, he provides us new visual information with which to evaluate our suburban environment. Rushca's aerial photographs demonstrate that in the study of our developed landscape, it is important to explore uncommon viewpoints in order to reveal the character of our built environments.

In the introduction to the *New Topographics* exhibition, curator William Jenkins had the following to say concerning Ruscha's photographs of the suburban landscape.

> The pictures were stripped of any artistic frills and reduced to an essentially topographic state, conveying substantial amounts of visual information but eschewing entirely the aspects of beauty, emotion and opinion. Regardless of the subject matter the appearance of neutrality was strictly maintained.[7]

[7] William Jenkins, New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape, (Rochester: International Museum of Photography, 1975), p.6.

Ed Ruscha, *Goodyear Tires, 6610 Laurel Canyon, North Hollywood*, 1967

Robert Adams' book entitled The New West: Landscapes Along the Colorado Front Range was an influential work documenting one segment of suburban development of the American West in 1974.

> Adams' pictures describe with precision and fastidious justice some of the mortal and venial sins that we have committed against our land in recent decades. The gaggle of plywood ranch houses at the foot of the mountain, fenced in by the trailer parks, acid neon, and extruded plastic of the highway, is an affront even to our modest expectations.[8]

These words written by John Szarkowski in the foreword are damning of the suburbs indeed and allude to the environmental agenda associated with Adams' work as well as much of late 20th century landscape photography. One series of photographs from The New West documents a home site as it undergoes construction.

Robert Adams, *Basement for a tract house. Colorado Springs,* 1974

[8] Robert Adams, The New West: Landscapes Along the Colorado Front Range, (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1974), p. viii.

Robert Adams, *Frame for a tract house. Colorado Springs,* 1974

Robert Adams, *Newly completed tract house. Colorado Springs,* 1974

These three photographs show a piece of land as it is transformed from construction site to home site and illustrates the value in showing the various stages involved in the process of suburbanization. For the images of "Sub-Urbana", I used scenes of suburban construction in order to reference the environmental damage associated with sprawl.

Joe Deal, *Albuquerque, New Mexico*, 1975

Another photographer to show in the *New Topographics* exhibition was Joe Deal. Many of his photographs are of the backyards of single-family homes taken from an elevated point of view. While they are not aerials, they are taken from a position of authority; above grade. By moving the lens above the roofline, Deal was able to expand the scope of view and show the viewer a broader area of his subjects. By photographing these areas of suburbia in such a manner, Joe Deal gives us the opportunity to revisit and

re-photograph them to examine more fully what has been gained or lost there.

One of the more celebrated members of the original *New Topographics* show was Lewis Baltz. Specifically, his series entitled *The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California*, taken in 1975, provides us with scenes not normally appearing on gallery walls, yet common to an increasingly built suburban landscape. In 1975 Lewis Baltz stated:

> There is something paradoxical in the way that documentary photographs interact with our notions of reality. To function as documents at all they must first persuade us that they describe their subject accurately and objectively; in fact, their initial task is to convince their audience that they are truly documents, that the photographer has fully exercised his powers of observation and description and has set aside his imaginings and prejudices. The ideal photographic document would appear to be without author or art. Yet, of course photographs, despite their verisimilitude, are abstractions; their information is selective and incomplete.[9]

While Lewis Baltz was supposedly denying issues of subjective beauty, he fully embraces the Minimalist aesthetic and created one of the more distinctive and influential styles amongst the *New Topographics* photographers. His series *The New Industrial Parks, Near Irvine, California* encapsulated many of the tenets of the late 20th century sensibility in the photographic medium. "Baltz's works began to be identified, even by the photography community, as architecturally oriented, 'topographic' pictures that drew attention to larger socal and architectural patterns, in a way similar to the Minimal and Conceptual art movements."[10]

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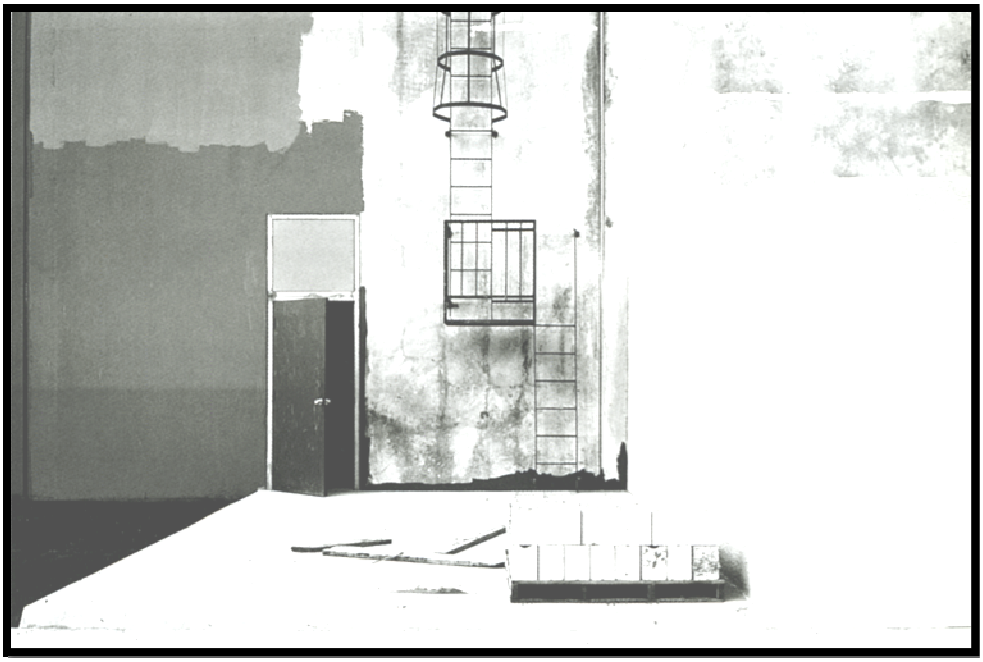
[9] Robert Adams, "The New West", *Art in America* Vol. 63, No. 2 (1975), 41.
[10] Jeff Rian, Lewis Baltz,(New York: Phaidon, 2001), p. 10.



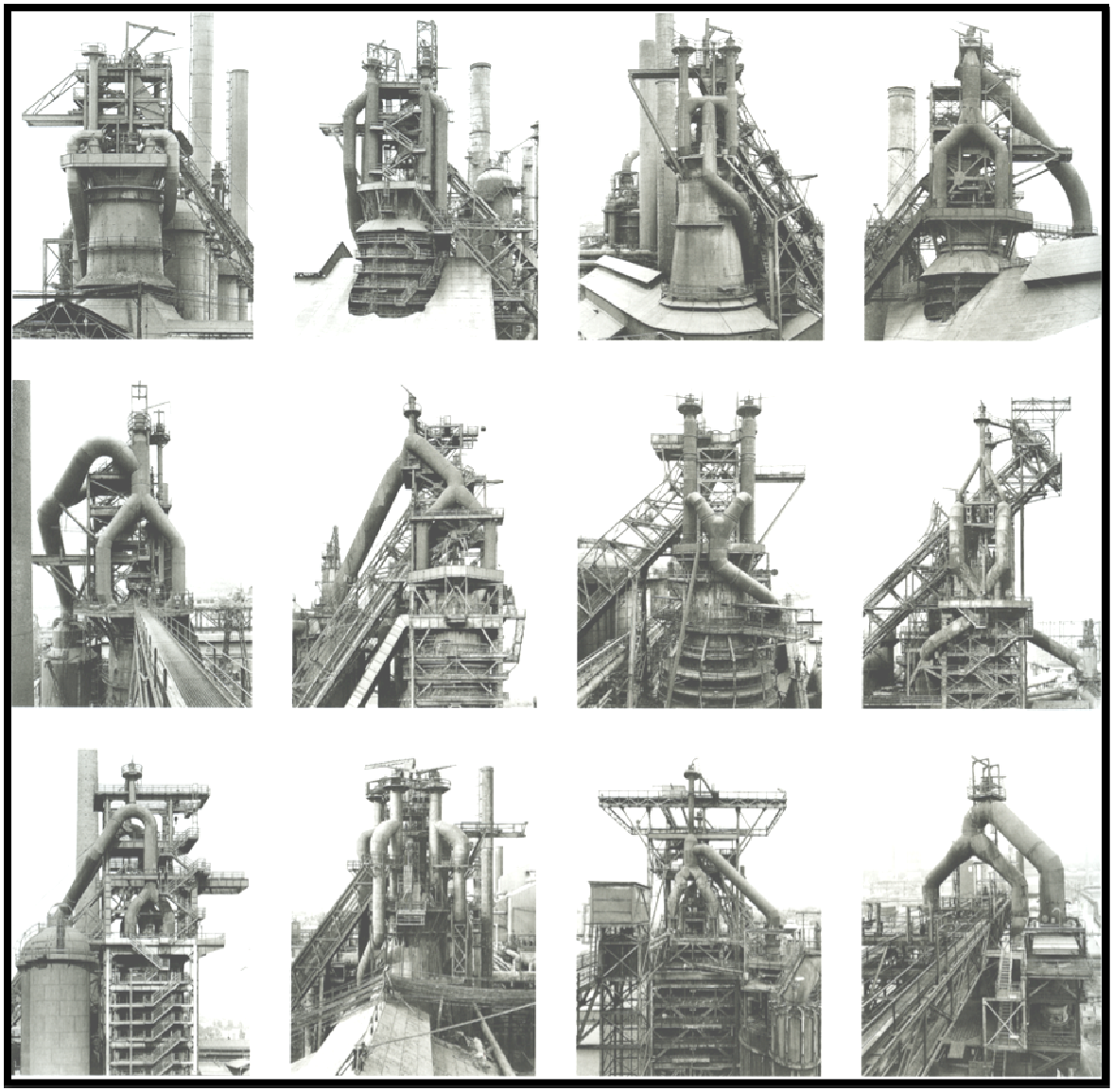
Lewis Baltz, *South Wall, Xerox, Element No. 27, New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California, USA*, 1975

Baltz elevated the banal to an art form, framing simple scenes of anonymous warehouses and portraying them in formal black and white. Since viewing his work, I have often tried to emulate his minimal composition, shooting buildings in the same 'frontal' manner as Baltz. After embracing this minimal aesthetic and mimicking it in color for a few months, I realized how derivative my work had become. Because of this, for "Sub-Urbana" I eventually abandoned my imitations and created photographs with more dynamic composition. The photographers of the 'New Topographics' movement were said to have successfully removed their personal signatures and created impartial, neutral documents of the American landscape. My hope was to create partial documents in order to provoke a dialogue about the nature and value of suburban sprawl.

Stephen Shore's work was also influential in my development of the series "Sub-Urbana". Shore's anonymous color landscapes of generic views of small town America

showed me how the mundane can be portrayed in color and still retain artistic and aesthetic value. His work in color helped bridge the gap between the old guard still using black and white to document this country's cities and towns and the work of younger photographers who would establish color landscape photography as a valid critical artistic medium. In my estimate, the natural greenery and blue skies juxtaposed with the manmade encourages a viewer to examine man's relationship to, and effects on the land. It is this assessment that is so important to "Sub-Urbana".

Stephen Shore, *Beverly and La Brea, Los Angeles, California, June 21,* 1975



Bernd & Hilla Becher, *Blast Furnaces, Germany, Luxembourg, U.S.A.* 1970-1989

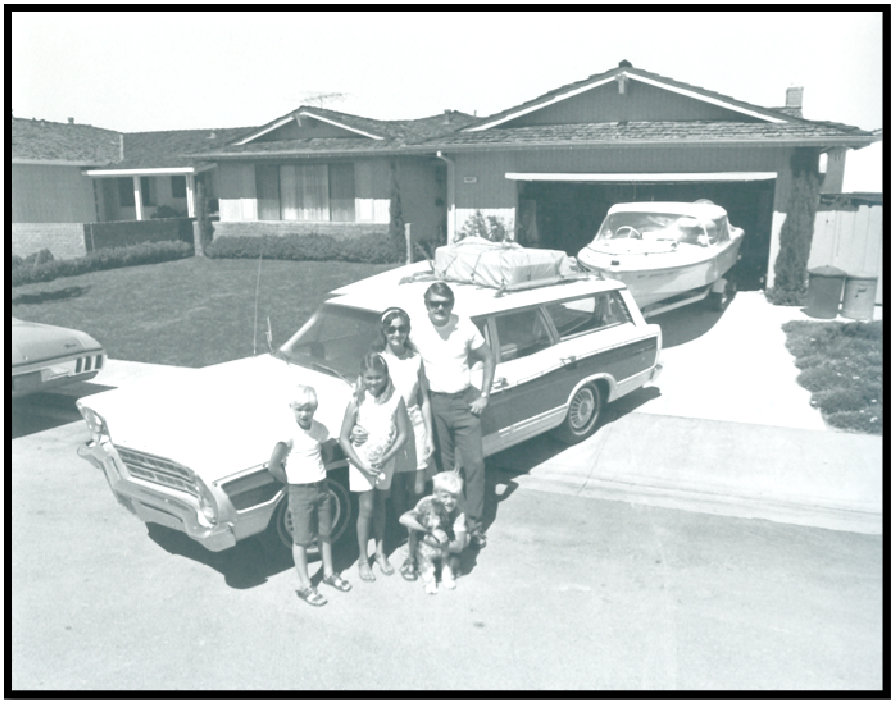
Perhaps two of the most influential artists to be associated with the *New Topographics* exhibition were Bernd and Hilla Becher. Their black and white typologies of the European industrial landscape have become recognized as some of the most successful documentary photographs of the late 20th century. By photographing such industrial structures as blast furnaces, cooling towers and grain elevators in exactly the same manner, perfectly balanced with a stark white background, they provide us with a

beautifully rigorous comparison of industrial structures. Bernd Becher began teaching at the Staatliche Kustakademie in Düsseldorf in 1972.

> Over the next two decades his class there emerged as a cornerstone of the avant-garde art scene, and its participants included the likes of Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff and Candida Höfer, all now renowned photographers.…[11]
> The students adopted the Bechers' method of portrayal, which strove for objectivity and always focused on the object, as an absolute imperative, and constantly questioned the substantive truth of a photographic image with regard to its possibilities for authentically reflecting reality.[12]

Thomas Struth, *Sommerstrasse, Düsseldorf,* 1980

[11] Susanne Lange, Bernd and Hilla Becher: Life and Work, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), p. 15.
[12] Ibid. p. 84.



Bill Owens, *Untitled,* Suburbia, 1973

In contrast to the work of Adams, Deal and Baltz, Bill Owens' influential book entitled Suburbia contains more personal vignettes of American life of the 1970s. Focusing on the people inhabiting these newly built suburban developments, Owens gives his audience a more intimate look at this growing phenomenon. Owens offers us a happier and more optimistic view of suburbia, focusing on the inhabitants and their leisure activities rather than the bleak desolate side shown by many of his contemporaries. Owens' book points out that suburbia is not all bad and many people, including the artist himself enjoy the benefits of suburban living. The caption under one of the untitled aerials from Suburbia reads: "I enjoy cooking, dogs, cats, kids, soccer and living here."[13]

[13] Bill Owens. Suburbia, (New York: Fotofolio, 1973), p. 17.

The artists of *New Topographics* were hailed for their impartial documentation of the urban landscape. The curator, William Jenkins praises the artists for their "stylistic anonymity". Certainly, the typologies of the Bechers stand as the quintessential, purely objective black and white documents of industrial structures. Also, Baltz's *Industrial Parks* series was quite successful at anonymously recording vignettes from the American suburban landscape. William Jenkins and others reporting on the importance of *New Topographics* praise this photographic movement for its impartial neutrality, yet each of the photographers managed to develop rather distinctive styles while documenting the changing landscape of 1970s America.

A photograph, by its nature, can never be completely impartial. A photograph edits out everything except what is contained within its frame; it both literally and figuratively communicates a chosen point of view. Therefore, the choice of framing is enough to allow the viewer to glean some manner of opinion or emotion put forth by the photographer. John Szarkowski reminds us that:

> Photography is a system of visual editing. At bottom, it is a matter of surrounding with a frame a portion of one's cone of vision, while standing in the right place at the right time. Like chess or writing, it is a matter of choosing from among the given possibilities, but in the case of photography the number of possibilities is not finite but infinite.[14]

So, every photograph represents a choice by the artist, and in making that choice out of all the possibilities, a photographer is immediately stating an opinion; primarily, that the included subject matter is somehow relevant. So, in almost every case, as soon as the shutter is opened, the artist is imparting some kind of subjective opinion about the world.

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[14] John Szarkowski, William Eggleston's Guide, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976), p. 6.

It is then up to the audience to decide why the subjects are important and what the artist is trying to say with a particular series of images.

Perhaps, the photographs from *New Topographics* were more neutral than the ones that came before them, but it is rather difficult to claim complete impartiality when the styles of the individual artists are so distinct and the environmental agenda behind the work is clearly evident. When we consider the subject matter, it is easy to see why some of these artists chose to show suburban sprawl in a less than positive light. They were most likely responding not only to what they saw happening to the West, but also to the environmental movement. The American West, the traditional repository of beautiful landscapes, was being spoiled by the banal homogeneity of cookie-cutter suburbs and the photographers of the day responded. They denied notions of traditional beauty because their subjects were no longer beautiful. It is laudable that they attempted to maintain a level of impartiality while documenting the results of sprawl, even though there was certainly an anti-suburb tone to most of the work.

A lesser-known photographer working in the tradition of *New Topographics,* Laurie Brown, has produced some thoughtful black and white panoramas of southern California housing. Her book, Recent Terrains (2000) depicts tracts of land as they are being prepared for future single-family home construction. Many of her images are taken from an elevated angle and give us a panoramic view of southern California housing tracts. Laurie Brown's photographs are framed in such a way to allow the viewer to effectively evaluate the built landscape in relation to the ground. With her portrayal of houses on a ridge, she gives a stark reminder of what is supplanted by recent suburban developments

of the American West.[15]

Laurie Brown, *Wier Canyon, Anaheim,* 1991

Photographers of the suburban landscape today must recognize and build upon the work of the artists included in the *New Topographics* exhibition, as well as all those who have dealt with the subject of suburbia. Like many artists, I was keenly influenced by the available literature concerning my subject matter. Much of what has been written about American suburbia has been negative. Authors such as Jane Holtz Kay, James Howard Kunstler and many others have decried the evils of suburban sprawl as if we were able to eliminate the suburbs, all would be well. But, if the suburbs are so ugly and damaging to society, why are they so popular? Is it simple economics, or do suburban developments give people exactly what they need and want from a home? One of principal purposes of the "Sub-Urbana" project was how to address these questions. As an artist, I considered how to depict the negativity and 'ugliness' of my subject while still trying to make beautiful imagery.

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[15] Laurie Brown, Recent Terrains: Terraforming the American West, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 49.

For the “Sub-Urbana” project, the question of how to portray the automobile was an important consideration. I chose to leave the automobile out of most of the images primarily because they can easily spoil an otherwise coherent composition. There are certainly hints of the car such as garages and the ubiquitous asphalt, but I wanted to call attention to the automobile by making it ‘conspicuously absent’ in much of the imagery. Hopefully, this approach will prompt the viewer to think about the role of the car in suburbia. Also, by not showing many cars or any people, I hoped to convey one of the principal criticisms of suburbia, which is the loss of community it fosters. The final image in the show contains an American-made sport utility vehicle, complete with faux wooden trim. Putting wood made of metal on an automobile has always struck me as a contradictory gesture that is emblematic of the suburban condition.

Picket Perspective, 2003

The S.U.V. in *Picket Perspective* also represents the culture of consumption prevalent in the United States today. We now find it necessary to fashion metal to look like wood to make our vehicles even heavier and less fuel-efficient. This design decision is surely meant to recapture the romanticism of the 'Woody'; a car popular with the 1960s surfing crowd on the California coast. I chose to portray this automobile in particular for its ability to capture the absurdities and contradictions of suburban living. The images of "Sub-Urbana" show the transformation of a typical tract of land from farmland to moderate density housing. Because of my childhood experiences on a farm in Maryland and the importance of the issues surrounding sprawl, I wanted to capture the transition of the land near my childhood home as it changed from verdant farmland to homogenous housing tracts. I strove to document the transient period of construction in order to draw attention to the damage to the environment required to sustain suburban living. The contrast between the natural splendor and the manmade construction is intended as a metaphor for the two sides to suburban sprawl. When we view these sites as they are being excavated, we are forced to consider the land itself when examining suburbia. By showing what literally lies beneath the 'Mc Mansions' and row houses, I hope the viewer will consider what long term repercussions might be associated with suburban housing in this country.

In the photograph *Picket Perspective*, I attempt to capture the suburban ideal while alluding to the negative side of suburbia. The tree-lined street complete with white picket fence and faux wooden clad sports utility vehicle are symbols of the dual nature of suburban sprawl. There is also a hint at our dependence on oil, which is so complete there

are oil stains in the street, a common site on America's roads. It appears that oil has become so taken for granted that we allow it to regularly spill into the street as if its value is incidental.

I wanted to use photography's power to freeze time to examine the land in transition. Some of these views will never be available again and they are vital to our evaluation of suburbia. By recording images of a suburban housing tract while it is being built, we are able to analyze the impact upon the environment. Through a comparison of views taken before and after the houses are occupied, we gain a keener understanding of what was lost and if it is worth what was gained.

"'Blue-sky', a slang term from the early 1900s refers to extreme speculation. A blue-sky deal is so visionary there is nothing in it except 'blue sky and hot air.'"[16] In my images, the blue skies represent the popularity of the suburbs while the churned earth alludes to the damage to the land and to the future of our environment. The skies are also intended to be picturesque and evoke traditional notions of beauty. This beauty is contrasted by the 'ugliness' both literal and figurative, of the construction sites throughout the series.

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[16] Delores Hayden. A Field Guide to Sprawl, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2004), p. 18.

Frontier Line, 2003

Passive Water Feature, 2003

In the photograph *Passive Water Feature*, the manmade lake surrounded by drainage pipes and "neo-traditional" housing is meant to symbolize man's conquest of nature while also reminding us that it is often desirable to surround our homes with natural elements, even if they are contrived. The drainage lake is an essential feature of any area with a large expanse of pavement, but it appears the developers have attempted to turn it into a scenic water feature for the residents surrounding it. However, the manhole peeking out above the water's surface belies its artificial nature.

Backyard, 2003

A few of the images from "Sub-Urbana" could be characterized as repetitious. While the repetition of form is a feature of minimalist art, it is not necessarily desirable in our built landscape. One of the primary purposes of this project was to illuminate the lack of variety and design of the suburbs. By framing the three, nearly identical houses in *Backyard*, I allow the viewer to scrutinize one example of suburban homogeneity. The seemingly endless lines of garages depicted throughout the "Sub-Urbana" series indicate how ubiquitous and important the car is to the American household and emphasize the repetitious nature of many suburban developments.

In the series of photographs of "Sub-Urbana", I tried to depict the duality of the suburbs. By juxtaposing man-altered soil with clear blue skies, I intend to illuminate the duality of suburbia. The skies represent the popularity and blissful ignorance of the many problems with these remote modes of living. The land that is literally in the process of being damaged is supposed to urge the viewer to consider the impact of suburban housing on the land and the environment in general. One of the principal challenges of this project was how to portray suburbia, which I consider to be ugly, in a way that achieves a level of truth and beauty. By positioning the beautiful, natural splendor of blue skies above the ugliness of suburban sprawl, I hope the viewer will consider the duality and value of American suburbia.

EPILOGUE

The "Sub-Urbana" project began in 2003 and much has changed in Urbana in five years. In order to more accurately determine the impact and value of suburban sprawl, it is useful to re-visit the sites of the original documents. On the following two pages there are two sets of "before and after" photographs. The first set of images contains *Executive Footprint* from the exhibition with a scene of the same building site five years later. This group of houses is named, "The Preserve at Stauffer Bridge". While it may seem antithetical to call a cul-de-sac a 'Preserve', the trees at the left of the frame are some of the few to survive the construction process. The second page contains the photograph entitled *Horizon* with this same scene as it looks in 2008. The brick row houses are semi-detached with street parking, and are essentially smaller, more affordable versions of the surrounding 'Mc Mansions'. The 'For Sale' sign serves an ominous warning that this mode of living may not be sustainable.

We must realize that while much of the suburban developments in this country are boring and homogenous, they are not, in and of themselves, the problem. The real problem lies in the endless garages with gasoline engines emitting countless tons of carbon into our atmosphere. Human activities on Earth of the past century have contributed greatly to the warming of our planet. We ignore this fact at the peril of our collective future.

Executive Footprint, Urbana, 2003

The Preserve, Urbana, 2008

Horizon, Urbana, 2003

For Sale, Urbana, 2008

Thanks to the work of Al Gore in An Inconvenient Truth (2006), we have at least been made aware that everyday activities such as driving a car or even turning on a light switch can have long term effects on our quality of life. It is absolutely imperative that we change our energy consumption habits individually and collectively. Whether it's finding an environmentally friendly form of fuel for our cars or improving our mass transit system, we have a responsibility to future generations to make changes to protect our environment and reduce global warming. However, the suburbs are popular, affordable and highly desirable for the average American family. Therein lies the fundamental dichotomy of the suburbs. The suburban housing strategy has proven convenient and affordable for the middle class, but we have learned that continuing our consumption habits could be potentially disastrous for the entire planet.

The United States is now fighting a costly war in order to protect our way of life, a way of life that could not exist without cheap oil. We are in the desert, fighting an increasingly unpopular and costly war so that our citizens can enjoy all the ease and comfort of the suburbs. The true cost of the war cannot even be accurately measured. Even when we add all the trillions of dollars together, we still will not have an idea of the full cost of the Iraqi invasion and subsequent occupation. Only time will tell whether or not the oil we burn is worth the blood spilled in order to secure it. Now that the awareness concerning our impact on the environment has been elevated, it has become a moral imperative for every citizen to do what he or she can to help reduce the causes of global warming. Through the process of making "Sub-Urbana" I have attempted to use the photographic medium to raise awareness about the potential consequences of American suburban sprawl.

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